

Of the First Officer

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Summary: Something different: The last moments of First Officer William Murdoch.

## Of the First Officer

IMPORTANT DISCLAIMER AND NOTE TO READERS: THIS MAY NOT BE THE TRUTH OF WHAT HAPPENED TO FIRST OFFICER MURDOCH. THIS VIGNETTE IS BASED ON JAMES CAMERON'S "TITANIC" AND THE AUTHOR WISHES TO TELL ALL READERS THAT THE CAUSE OF WILLIAM MURDOCH'S DEATH IS NOT CONFIRMED AND MAY NOT HAVE, IN REALITY, COMMITTED SUICIDE. THIS STORY IS DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF THE BRAVE FIRST OFFICER MURDOCH AND ALL THE RESIDENTS OF HIS HOMETOWN, DALBEATTIE, SCOTLAND.

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"Iceberg right ahead!" came the urgent call through the telephone, shortly before midnight on April 14, 1912.

"Hard to starboard!" William McMaster Murdoch, the first officer of the R.M.S. Titanic was in command. He knew he had to handle the situation himself. A moment later, it was "Hard to port!"

Crewmembers telegraphed the engine room from the bridge. The engines needed to be put full astern, and then as fast and as far as it would go to port side.

A long minute passed, and the great bow of the ship was still heading straight for the massive iceberg. Mr. Murdoch shoved his hands in his pockets. Turn, turn...

Up in the crow's nest, the two lookout men who had first spotted the iceberg were shivering from nervousness and cold. "Why aren't they turning?"

Finally the bow slowly began to veer to the left. Everyone on the bridge held their breath. Would they avoid the iceberg?

The crewmen waited for what seemed like hours while the Titanic slowly turned. Mr. Murdoch's eyes were glued to the bow, like everyone else's on the bridge. No, he thought. We can't turn fast enough. We're going to hit. But he remained silent.

Just then the whole ship heard the sound of scraping, as if it had run up against gravel. The Titanic jolted and shook. People on all decks were roused from their sleep.

Men drinking a late brandy and smoking near the Grand Staircase watched the chandeliers tremble and their drinks slosh around. Stewards quickly reassured worried passengers that there was nothing to worry about.

People promenading on the boat deck and staring at the immense tower of ice suddenly had to scramble out of the way to avoid being hit by chunks of falling ice and snow.

Once the news had reached every passenger that all was well, people went back to their business. Some steerage boys on the well decks amused themselves by throwing snowballs and kicking pieces of ice back and forth to each other.

Meanwhile, there was panic in the boiler rooms. Water was bursting in through the Titanic's thick double hull underwater. As the stokers and their mates were running out, the watertight compartment doors began to close. The last few escaping were almost crushed.

Up on the bridge, First Officer Murdoch watched the "watertight doors shut" lights switch on. He exhaled heavily as Frederick Fleet in the crow's nest turned to his mate and said, "That 'as a close, shave, wa'nt it?"

Suddenly, Captain Edward J. Smith rushed in. His clothing was disheveled, as if he had just awakened from a nap. "What has happened?" he demanded from his man in charge.

It had been a terribly close call, and Mr. Murdoch could not hide the trembling in his voice as he explained. "An iceberg, sir...I put her hard to starboard and ran the engines full astern but it was too close-I tried to port round it, but she hit, and I..."

"Close the watertight doors," ordered the captain.

"The doors are closed, sir."

To examine the extent of the damage done, Captain Smith called in Thomas Andrews, master shipbuilder of the Titanic who knew every inch of his ship by heart. He also called Bruce Ismay, the owner.

Mr. Andrews unrolled a blueprint cross-section of the ship that showed each of the sixteen watertight compartments. The usually cheerful Irishman spoke gravely now. "She can stay afloat with the first four compartments breached but not five. Not five. As she goes down by the head, the water will spill over the tops of the bulkheads, one by one, back and back. There's no stopping it."

The naïve millionaire Ismay was disbelieving. "But this ship can't sink!" he exclaimed.

Andrews spoke in a strange, assertive tone. "She's made of iron, sir, I assure you she can. Tis a mathematical certainty."

"How much time?" asked the captain.

Andrews's face was very grave. "An hour, two at most."

"And how many aboard, Mr. Murdoch?"

The first officer's voice trembled again as he answered his captain. "Two thousand two hundred souls on board, sir." There was room in the lifeboats for half that amount. At the captain's command, the officers of Titanic took their places next to the lifeboats, waiting to fill them with passengers.

In another twenty or thirty minutes, the bow of Titanic was halfway submerged and there was panic ensuing on deck. People struggled for places on a lifeboat. They pushed and shoved violently. "Women and children first!" shouted the crewmen.

First Officer Murdoch was in the thick of it all, along with other crewmembers and Mr. Andrews, telling people to lower full lifeboats and at the same time trying to keep back desperate and violent passengers. Over the din they could hear strains of lively dance music. The ship's band was playing.

One of the richest and most ruthless passengers on board, Caledon Hockley, ran to catch up to Mr. Murdoch, who was busy with hooking up the falls of a lifeboat. Hockley slipped a huge wad of fifty dollar bills into the pocket of the stunned officer. "So we have an understanding, then," he stated. It was not a question. Then Hockley disappeared into the crowd.

A half hour of terror passed as the great Titanic sunk lower and lower into the ocean. The third class passengers were on deck now, fighting for a place on one of the few already crowded lifeboats that remained. It had become so insane that Murdoch and the other officers were forced to use firearms to sustain order. One passenger fought his way right up to the boat, screaming, "Wilya give us a chance to live, ya limey bastard!" He didn't stop even when Mr. Murdoch's pistol was pointed at him. He screamed desperately, "I'll shoot any man who tries to get past me, get back!"

Just then Mr. Hockley came up to the officer. With a nod, he started for the lifeboat. He called out, but Mr. Murdoch didn't answer. "Keep back," he said suddenly to Hockley, raising the gun once more, this time to the wealthy passenger's face.

"We had a deal, damn you!" exclaimed the surprised Hockley, starting for the boat again. The crowd's shouts grew louder with shouts of the unfairness.

Murdoch stopped where he stood. Wait, wait a minute. What was he doing? How could he be doing this to innocent human beings? Everyone could not be rich, but right now everyone deserved a chance to live. This would be one time where someone couldn't pull out their wallet, hand out money and have not a thing to worry about. Murdoch reached in his pocket for the wad of bills. Money did not matter now. He pulled them out and flung them with all his might into Caledon

Hockley's face.

The tuxedoed Hockley looked bewildered. The crowd, most of which had never seen do much money all at once, gasped. Mr. Murdoch took the pistol and pointed it at Hockley once more. With his Scottish accent, he told Hockley with a menacing voice, "Your money can't save you any more that it can save me. Get back!"

Murdoch's gun was ready to fire, and as the man who had screamed earlier advanced towards the lifeboat, Murdoch pulled the trigger and shot both him and another man who was climbing the falls ropes of the boat. Instantly people began to shout curses toward the stunned officer. Suddenly everything seemed blurred to him. His heart seemed to stand still as he stared at what he had done.

Another officer arrived to view the commotion. He called to Mr. Murdoch, who was standing stock still and staring straight ahead. There was a distant look in his eyes. He didn't answer his shipmate, but he saluted and then put the pistol to his head. The crewman yelled something frantically to him and tried to get through the gaping mob.

But before anyone could stop him, First Officer Murdoch pulled the trigger and fell lifelessly into the freezing cold ocean.

End  
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